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Behind the Scenes with the Illinois Pupils Reading Circle¹

By LOUISE ANTHONY

Dupo Community High School

The High School Committee of the Illinois Pupils Reading Circle has the challenging task each year of selecting a group of books for adolescent readers. Many have been the questions as to how the list is compiled. As an answer to these questions, perhaps a brief "behind the scenes" glimpse of the inner workings of the committee is not amiss.

First of all, a few background statistics are in order. Organized in 1889, under the auspices of the Illinois Education Association, the Reading Circle has had the same Secretary-Manager for twenty-eight years, Mr. D. F. Nickols. Under his management the use of the list by schools of the state has steadily increased. The first year, 20,000 books were purchased by the schools of the state. In 1945, this number had increased to 134,000. This is no small achievement.

Eight years ago, the High School Committee came into existence as an integral part of the Reading Circle. This was in recognition of the fact that separate committees should deal with the reading needs of the elementary and high schools. The personnel of the High School Committee includes, in addition to Mr. Nickols, the manager: Robert Ring, Assistant Superintendent of Public Instruction, as chairman; Harold Trimble, High School Visitor, University of Illinois; Otis Keeler, Assistant Superintendent of Public Instruction; Russell B. Troxel, Principal, Farmington; Louise Anthony, High School Librarian, Dupo.

¹ Reprinted from *Illinois Libraries*, Vol. 28 (November, 1946), pp. 450-451.

All during the summer and fall, books are submitted by the publisher to each member of the Committee. The publishers usually submit books which they consider most suitable for adolescents. This is an aid to the committee in that some preliminary weeding-out of undesirable books is accomplished. However, any member has the privilege of requesting from the publisher a book not already submitted but believed to be desirable for consideration.

In addition to the books being read by the Committee, other devices of selection are used. Students of two schools act as "guinea pigs" for the list. In the Community High School at Dupo the books are placed in the school library collection. Thus the books are in a situation similar to that for which they are destined. As the time draws near for the Committee to make its selections for the list, comments on the books are requested. This is done through the English classes and the Readers' Club, a school activity devoted wholly to the pleasures of reading. In making their comments, Dupo students are aware that they are judging books for other boys and girls. Thus they take it seriously. These comments are kept by the librarian until the meeting of the Committee.

At University High School in Urbana, the books are read by certain of the English classes as a unit in critical appreciation. Here, too, the students judge the suitability of the books for other adolescents. These comments are given to Mr. Trimble for the Committee's use.

Thus, two groups of students have looked over the original group of books. The students at Dupo present a cross section of high school opinion, typical of the majority of the high schools of the state. The students at University represent a typical group since the school's purpose is college preparatory. When the two points of view on book choices can be harmonized, then a good book for adolescents has been found.

Before the momentous meeting of the Committee to indicate their choices for adoption on the annual list, tentative lists of forty books out of the original ninety have been sent in to Mr. Nickols by each member, indicating the number of votes each book has received. Preliminary to the Committee meeting, Mr. Nickols submits the original list to members of the Illinois State Library staff. They indicate their first, second, and third choices. Thus there is an additional aid in selection.

The day for the adoption of books comes. The Committee members gather in the office at Lincoln with the composite lists

and their comments on each book. Mr. Nickols has, also, the recommendations of the Illinois State Library staff. The meeting is called to order by Mr. Ring of the State Department of Public Instruction. Automatically all books which have received a majority of votes on the composite list are declared adopted. These, of course, are not enough. Then, in turn, each member nominates a book from those remaining on the first list. If a majority concur, the book is adopted.

Sometimes there is no question as to the inclusion of a book on the list. Sometimes there are lively discussions, but always two factors are kept in mind. The first is whether or not the book will appeal to the tastes, as well as meet the reading needs and abilities, of adolescents. The judgment of the high school students who have read the books is important. No book which has been definitely vetoed and rejected by them ever goes on the list.

Second, there is the consideration as to whether or not the book is suitable for a high school library collection where the book budget must be closely watched. Here the Committee members weigh carefully "pro and con" the reactions in order to have a list which will give a well-balanced book collection, in succeeding years, to small schools, or which will serve as a basic list for larger schools with more generous book budgets. When two books of similar subject matter are considered, the final choice is the book, which, in the opinion of the Committee, will best meet the needs of the book collections of the high schools of Illinois.

The motivating purpose of the members of the High School Committee of the Illinois Pupils Reading Circle is to compile a list which the high schools of the State of Illinois can rely upon from year to year and feel certain that their book needs and interests are carefully and thoughtfully considered.

College Freshman English¹

By CHARLES RICHARD SANDERS

Duke University

What, let us ask, should the objectives of the freshman English course in college be? These objectives, like those of all other courses in the college curriculum, should be related to the broad,

¹ Reprinted from *South Atlantic Bulletin*, Vol. IX, No. 4 (February, 1944), pp. 6-7.

general objectives of the whole college. It has become popular, I think too popular, on certain college campuses recently, to say with a great show of confidence that the purpose of the whole college program is simply to make good citizens. I have no objection to the word *citizens*, provided the same broad meaning is associated with it that Aristotle, Cicero, Sir Thomas More, Francis Bacon, Edmund Burke, and Thomas Jefferson associated with the conception. But I do object in this context to the inadequacy of the adjective *good*. It is not the essential purpose of the colleges to develop good citizens. It is the responsibility of the elementary and secondary schools and of the various institutions and social forces of society at large to do so. We should be able to assume that society can develop *good citizens* without having to use the time and money consumed when students are put through college. College is for the exceptional citizen, the citizen who can assimilate the wisdom bequeathed to us by tradition, the citizen who likes books and can learn from them. It is certainly not for the young man with a sophisticated body and a naive, shallow, cocksure mind. It is the responsibility of the colleges to develop *leading citizens*, those who are prepared to direct and enlighten the good citizens who do not go to college. Unless we set our sights above the level of what we mean by good citizens, we shall find ourselves stagnating in a backwash of mediocrity, and we shall be unable to justify the existence of the institutions we serve.

The part which the freshman course in English can play in the development of leading citizens is, I think you will agree, very important. You already know what the specific objectives of this course are. Briefly, the course should teach the student to write correctly and effectively. To learn to do so, the student must realize that he is attempting to master a complex skill, for many people very difficult: a skill which, like swimming, golf, tennis, and chess, must in the main be self-taught through the processes of constant practice and self-discipline. It has to do not merely with words and syntax, but with a clarification and refinement of the thinking processes. It is, in one sense, a course in mental hygiene; in another sense, a course in intellectual good manners. (I wish that a word could be said here for the other kind of good manners.) In this course the student must preserve his individuality and at the same time subdue his impulses toward wild and rampant individualism. Thus, among other things, he must develop the social virtue of a reasonable conformity with the way in which other people write English and expect to read it; that is,

he must be willing to accept some of the conventions concerning spelling, grammar, punctuation, paragraphing, etc. He must develop the habit of accuracy. Writing should teach him, as Bacon said, to be an exact man. Certainly in a democracy, where the minimum of discipline is imposed by the state, all citizens, to come back to our general objective, need to have discovered a few things concerning self-discipline and intelligent, deliberate, but not slavish, conformity to group practices.

A second objective of freshman English is to encourage students to develop good habits of speech. The aim here is not to teach elocution or the special uses of the voice which an actor or an orator needs to have mastered, but rather to teach students enough about the use of the voice to enable them to read and speak aloud clearly, correctly, and without artificiality. Probably this objective has been too much neglected.

A third objective is to teach students to grasp what they see on the printed page. Those of us who teach the course share a responsibility here with those who teach other courses that require reading. The question arises as to whether the course in freshman English should attempt to do more than teach students to read simple expository matter with reasonable apprehension and intelligence, that is, whether the course should also teach potential leading citizens to read some of the best literature, not merely with comprehension but with imaginative insight and a capacity for social sympathy. We have to face this question on the freshman level, because in some colleges the general requirements for a degree do not, except for the foreign language requirement, include a course in literature.

One other thing which the course in freshman English should do (and here again we share our responsibility with other departments) is to teach students to listen attentively and understandingly. Even a *good* citizen should be a polite and intelligent listener.

The attempt to achieve the objectives of freshman English brings us face to face with many serious difficulties. We may find, for instance, that some students have been admitted to college who have had very poor preparation and who have very little aptitude. Worst of all, many students have, over a period of sixteen or seventeen years, formed bad language habits which we must root up and substitute good habits for in just a few months. Sometimes we wish that we could get students who had not even been exposed to English, just as a chemistry teacher may get a student

who has not had chemistry; then we could at least get off to an even start. I intend, by the way, no criticism of the various admissions committees; I am fully sympathetic with them and know some of the difficulties they face. I believe, however, that though we may have to admit many students who are not college material, we should not have to keep them, not longer than a year at most.

A second difficulty which confronts us is that the time is too short for what we have to do. We should like to do even more than we do, to teach the special linguistic practices and forms which go with law, or with medicine, or with certified public accounting, or with civil engineering; but we do not have time. The English which we should try to teach is that which educated men use when they are writing for other educated men outside their own vocations and professions, or when they are speaking to such men. We have found that students frequently make remarkable progress in our course after they have discovered that we mean business. But even so, most of us who have taught freshman English are convinced that we do not have time to teach adequately the essential English through which educated men and women must communicate with each other.

Still another difficulty which we face, and it is a very formidable one, is the absence in many colleges of a general policy concerning standards. My own experience confirms in me the conviction that the only way to get results in a course in English composition is to make the course a stiff one: to teach hard and to grade hard. The two things must, of course, go together. But one thing is certain, grades in freshman English will never have the integrity they should have unless the instructors have complete freedom to turn back at the end of each semester the students who have not done the work. Since many students will probably continue to come to us poorly prepared, we shall normally have to turn back a great many. Once the students know that we mean business, however, the casualty list from one year to the next will begin to shrink. Students, like other intelligent people, have respect for a thing when they become convinced that they can count on it.

This leads me to mention something which every college must have if its course in freshman English is to be reasonably successful. It must have in the student body and in the faculty a tradition of loyalty to the objectives of the course. Some institutions are fortunate in having such a tradition. Usually where it exists the upperclassmen, the faculty members in other depart-

ments, a wise dean, or an alumnus will be discovered from time to time saying these words of comfort to the bewildered and suffering freshman who has entered the course: "You are catching the devil while you are in that course; but stay with it; you will later on be mighty glad you had such a stiff course in English. I know that it is not much fun, but it is one of the best courses in college. It is a baptism of fire; but if you don't back away from it, it will help make a man of you." (Incidentally, the alumnus who can talk to a freshman in this way is the alumnus who has this sense of values, rather than the alumnus who barely got through college, who scoffs at study, who talks about the importance of making contacts, or, as he would say, "contacting," who prates about developing personality, and who, once an alumnus, spends most of his time following the team.) The freshman, to return to him, needs very much to have some one, or several persons, talk to him in the manner I have indicated. The course in English has a way of getting in his hair, or threatening his ego, of objecting to his grammar and pronunciation, about which he is sensitive, because his usage has for years been good enough for his parents, his fond bachelor uncle, the best football player on the high school team, and his girl friend. In spite of all that a good teacher of composition can do, English seems artificial and affected to him. Furthermore, his English teacher is a born "horse" who *makes* students take announced quizzes and turn in themes on time. This freshman, then, needs someone outside the class to tell him that the whole thing is worth while.

The last general difficulty lies, as some of the others do, in the nature of the task we have undertaken. Proficiency in English is a skill. Like all other skills, it can be lost after it has been developed. It will be lost unless the person who has it is vigilant to continue to practice it on the highest possible level. No skill is easier to lose; in none is there greater danger of backsliding. It follows that faculty members in other departments must do all in their power to encourage the student after he has passed the course in freshman English to hold on to what he has and if possible to develop an even greater mastery over language. An English instructor can tell you how well a student can speak, write, and read immediately after he leaves the freshman course. He cannot predict how well he will use English two years or even one year later.

These are some of the difficulties which a college or university encounters in its effort to achieve the objectives of the course in

freshman English. There are others. It is not too early to begin considering ways to remove these difficulties. Solutions will not come overnight. We must do what we can, not only to create as many forces as possible to bolster the course and motivate the student but also to remove the counter attractions, or perhaps we should call them "counter-motivators." Last of all, I should like to suggest and emphasize particularly the fact that not merely the staff for freshman English but faculty members in every department have direct responsibility; it is the center of the activities which help us to achieve the objectives with which we are now concerned; it must not try to pass the buck; but it cannot, I must repeat and emphasize, do the whole job. There is an important sense, as others have observed, in which every teacher in the university should be an English teacher. He should, for one thing, set his students a good example in the English which he himself speaks and writes. He should also give his students the impression that he considers the use of clear, correct, and effective English important. He should certainly insist that students avoid back-sliding in English while they are taking his course. He should watch over their reading habits and their speech habits. But, more important, he should see to it that the student increases his command over English by mastering the peculiar terminology, idioms, and forms for taking notes or recording investigations that almost all college courses have. Thus it should be possible for the student after he leaves his freshman year not only to hold on to the degree of proficiency in English which he has already achieved but also to increase that proficiency and thereby experience a feeling of growing intellectual power. A little bit of attention exercised constantly, a little bit of vigilance, a little bit of insistence, and a little bit of encouragement from *everyone* teaching in the university will be of great help to the student and will go far to solve a problem from which none of us can escape. Certainly we must all work on this problem in a spirit of cooperation if we expect to see graduated from our colleges men and women who are to become leading citizens of the nation.

Diagnostic and Remedial Teaching in Secondary Schools

By GLENN MYERS BLAIR

Reviewed by MILDRED W. GOODNER
Department of English, University of Illinois

What are the causes of reading and writing difficulties? What is the extent of reading retardation among high-school students? How can spelling and penmanship be improved? Answers to questions like these are presented in a recent study of remedial teaching.

In his book, *Diagnostic and Remedial Teaching in Secondary Schools*, Professor Glenn Myers Blair, educational psychologist at the University of Illinois, reports the findings of a recent nation-wide survey of remedial teaching in secondary schools. The book will give teachers and administrators many suggestions for carrying out remedial programs in their schools. The reader will appreciate the clear style, the well-defined terminology, the chapter summaries, the many illustrations, tables, and case studies, and the extensive documentation.

Since "about 80 to 90 percent of all study activities require silent reading as a means of gaining knowledge,"¹ the author has devoted the first half of the book to remedial reading. He discusses eight ways of locating poor readers; fifteen causes of reading deficiency; many techniques and procedures for providing remedial treatment; lists of books, magazines, and newspapers of interest to the retarded pupil, and suggested textbooks and workbooks for teaching reading skills; and a nation-wide report on reading programs in junior and senior high schools.

Evidence shows that students as well as teachers recognize that more training in how to read should be included in the curriculum. According to Professor Blair, teachers should diagnose poor readers early in the year and adopt the following program: "(1) begin where the pupil is, (2) inform him frequently by means of charts and graphs of the progress he is making, (3) see that the exercises engaged in satisfy some basic goal of the pupil, (4) frequently commend the pupil for work well done, and

¹ Glenn Myers Blair, *Diagnostic and Remedial Teaching in Secondary Schools*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1947, p. 3.

(5) supply a variety of exercises and activities so that the work will not become monotonous."²

In the second half of the book, Professor Blair makes valuable suggestions regarding the teaching of arithmetic, spelling, handwriting, and the fundamentals of English, and describes in detail the correct procedure for making case studies of students found deficient in these skills.

Students who cannot spell have been sent to Professor Blair for help. Their spelling deficiency may be caused by physical, intellectual, and emotional factors. Studies show that spelling errors result from mispronunciation, poor visual perception and memory, lack of spelling practice, and careless penmanship. In teaching a new word, the instructor should have the pupil look at the word; say the word; write the word while saying the letters; and use the word in a sentence.³ Reports from schools all over the country indicate that the poor speller is receiving increased attention and is making rapid improvement where appropriate teaching methods are being used.

Educators frequently ask, "What are the minimum essentials of English which every pupil should know and use?" In answering this question, Professor Blair states that, in oral English, verb forms cause the most difficulty; in written English, errors in commas, capitalization, verbs, pronouns, and sentence structure are the most prevalent. Teachers should give students ample opportunity to speak and write English correctly, should stress practice at points of error rather than the study of formal grammar, and should motivate assignments by relating them to life.

A sympathetic teacher can study the weaknesses of her pupils and patiently lead them to higher achievements. Her diagnostic methods and her remedial teaching can be improved by studying current literature, such as *Diagnostic and Remedial Teaching in Secondary Schools*. Teachers of English will find in Professor Blair's book specific suggestions for aiding their retarded students, and superintendents will find in it valuable information regarding the administration of a remedial program.

² *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

The Art of Plain Talk

By RUDOLF FLESCH

Reviewed by CONSTANCE PEYROT

Department of English, University of Illinois

Anyone who reads *The Art of Plain Talk*¹ by Rudolf Flesch will come away from the book with a refreshingly new slant on the use of language. Those of us who teach English and abide by the conventional rules will receive a healthy shock upon finding that Dr. Flesch uses the words *lousy* and *stuff* when he feels that they best express the meaning he wishes to convey. Furthermore he advocates using split infinitives and also using prepositions at the ends of sentences when these procedures make for simplicity and clarity. Although we may not agree with some of the more radical recommendations Dr. Flesch makes, we must admit that the evidence he presents in support of his case is convincing.

Dr. Flesch's training as a librarian and researcher and his experience as an editor and teacher well qualify him to write on the subject of plain talk. In his doctoral dissertation, *Marks of Readable Style*, he dealt with this same topic. In it, he set up his problem; then he entered into a program of exhaustive scientific study and research to solve it. In this book, an adaptation of his dissertation, Dr. Flesch first explains what plain talk is, and then shows how we can learn to speak and write it. In addition, he presents what he calls a yardstick formula for measuring the difficulty or readability of any piece of writing.

Through diagnostic studies of different types of literature, ranging from the *Bible* to the Joe Palooka comic strip, Dr. Flesch has learned what people read and what they understand. By using specific illustrations from all kinds of magazines, newspapers, novels, textbooks, official documents, and speeches, he makes clear what simple, easy-to-understand prose is, how it gets that way, and why it is superior to the more complicated or embellished types of writing, such as income tax instructions. At the ends of some of the chapters are exercises that could be used in the classroom to help students overcome certain speaking and writing difficulties. Eliminating wordiness, substituting live words for empty ones, adding human interest through references to people, and translating passages into conversational English are a few of the activities treated in these exercises.

¹ Harper & Brothers, New York, 1946.

The style of Dr. Flesch's book is, in itself, an impressive argument for his case; he practices what he preaches and does a good job of it. He states things simply, clearly, and effectively; and the lively, conversational tone of the book keeps us interested until he has said all he wants to say.

Although the average English teacher probably will not want to accept or put all of Dr. Flesch's doctrines into practice, every teacher should find something of value in this stimulating and thought-provoking book. We may not approve of using plain talk at all times, but the advantage of this type of language for informative purposes is obvious.

Great Teachers

Edited by HOUSTON PETERSON

Reviewed by MARJORIE FOX
Graduate Student, University of Illinois

Nearly everyone remembers with respect and gratitude some teacher who has influenced his life by pointing the way to new regions of thought in the world of books, nature, art, or life itself. The memory is a happy one, a tribute to those few who have made teaching an art rather than a profession. Perhaps each of us would like to add a personal "thank you" chapter to Houston Peterson's anthology, for *Great Teachers*¹ is a series of essays of appreciation written by students in every field about the teacher who helped them most. Some of the teachers taught from McGuffey Readers; some taught by using the world's great master pieces as texts; but they had one gift in common, a "contagious enthusiasm," and struck in their students the precious spark of intellectual curiosity.

The introductory essay is Helen Keller's tribute to her great teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, who literally taught a whole new world to her pupil. It is followed by John Stuart Mill's sketch of his father's discipline, which is said to have given Mill an advantage of a quarter of a century over his contemporaries.

In contrast, the next essay presents a teacher-student situation closer to our own experience. Lizzie Moore taught a country school in Ohio in the middle of the nineteenth century. Her duties

¹ Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1946.

were far more than teaching. "She put the schoolhouse in good condition for revival meetings. She had to scrub the floor the morning after evening services to clear away the results of a lot of tobacco chewing." In the early years of our country, there must have been many Lizzie Moores who sowed the first seeds of learning in the new West.

Moses Woolson, New England principal and high school teacher, and Frederick Sanderson, famous English headmaster, whose divinity lesson is presented as taken down by two students, complete the list of preparatory school teachers. The sketch of Sanderson, presented indirectly through disjointed student notes, makes one of the most charming selections in the anthology.

The names of the teachers described in the next group of essays read like a list in *Who's Who in American Education*. Mark Hopkins, Charles Garman, Francis Gummere, Woodrow Wilson, Simon Patten, George Burr, Frederick Turner, George Kittredge, John Dewey, Charles A. Beard, Carlton Hayes, John Erskine, and Frederick Woodbridge are among the teachers discussed.

The last group of essays takes us to the laboratories, studios, and homes of masters in the arts and sciences — Louis Agassiz, William James, Sigmund Freud, Cesar Franck, Theodor Leschetizky, Auguste Rodin, Robert Henri, and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The essays are not solely eulogistic. Criticisms as well as plaudits are offered. Any teacher should find these statements of the student point of view a valuable aid in perfecting his own teaching practice. In the excellent introductory selection and epilogue, Houston Peterson offers a few comments about teaching today. He believes that there is "contagion in the study of great teachers in action" and "amusement and consolation in discovering that our anxieties are not unique." He urges that the teacher make himself accessible to his students, and believes that this can be done without demoting the college professor to the "good fellow" level. He insists that his is not a plea for "campus personalities" but for the scholar or artist who is interested in imparting his knowledge to the student as well as in publishing articles to add to his professional reputation. His plea is for a real teacher, one who shows the way. He believes that such a teacher in our times must relate his work to life outside the classroom, and must himself accept the responsibility for arousing the students' interest.

In this age of anthologies, *Great Teachers* is an unusual and valuable contribution. It is not a comprehensive study of teaching methods. It does not take part in educational controversies. It does remind us that real teachers are needed now as never before. The essays, though not primarily portraits, are interesting to the lay reader as informative and entertaining personal glimpses of men who have shaped our times. For the teacher, the essays are inspirational. What better proof could a teacher have of the value and importance and responsibility of his work than the testimony of his students?

A REMINDER

High school teachers of English should glean from the compositions written by their students this spring those which might be submitted for inclusion in "Some of the Best Illinois High School Writing of 1947," to be published as the January 1948 issue of the *Illinois English Bulletin*. All contributions should be addressed to Illinois English Bulletin, 204a Lincoln Hall, Urbana, Illinois. Each manuscript should bear the name of the author, the name of his high school, and the name of his English teacher. No manuscripts will be returned unless they are accompanied by return postage.

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